

FILMS OF P. RAMLEE: AN ANALYSIS OF SEXUAL POLITICS AND SOCIAL CLASS CONFLICTS

by

OOI CHIA-YI

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OOI CHIA-YI

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FILEM-FILEM P. RAMLEE: SATU ANALISIS POLITIK SEKSUAL DAN KONFLIK KELAS SOSIAL

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini ingin mencapai dua objektif utama iaitu untuk meningkatkan pengetahuan terhadap pemahaman politik seksual dalam isu diskriminasi gender ke atas kaum wanita dan menyelidiki isu konflik stratifikasi kelas sosial dalam masyarakat yang terdapat dalam naratif filem-filem melodrama P. Ramlee. Enam karya P. Ramlee telah dikaji dengan menggunakan dua jenis keadah kajian iaitu analisis teksual dan naratif yang dapat menggabungkan pendekatan teori filem feminis psikoanalisis dan juga teori kelas konflik Marx. Penemuan analisis dalam keenam-enam filem menunjukkan penggunaan perwakilan serentak hegemonik dan tentangan hegemonik didalam teks filem yang mencerminkan keutuhan sistem patriarki. Pengobjektifan tubuh kaum wanita berfungsi untuk mengukuhkan hierarki-hierarki sosial, keseksualan dan kelakuan berdasarkan gender dalam masyarakat. Penemuan dalam analisis keenam-enam filem yang terpilih juga menunjukkan bahawa golongan kelas sosial pekerja adalah didiskriminasikan dalam rangka kerja sistem sosial yang direproduksi sebagai satu 'masyarakat berkelas' supaya kesinambungan pengasingan kelas sosial mesti wujud untuk melindungi kepentingan-kepentingan golongan kelas menengah dan golongan elit pemerintah dalam masyarakat kapitalis. Struktur naratif dalam keenam-enam filem P. Ramlee yang terpilih sentiasa menyediakan satu resolusi konformis untuk semua konflik yang wujud.

FILMS OF P. RAMLEE: AN ANALYSIS OF SEXUAL POLITICS AND SOCIAL CLASS CONFLICTS

ABSTRACT

This thesis strives to achieve two major goals. One is to increase the knowledge on the understanding of sexual politics in gender discrimination towards women. Secondly, is to examine the conflict of the division of class in Malaysian society highlighted in the moving images and texts of the six chosen P. Ramlee's melodramas. The analyses of these six films were according to the structure of both textual and narrative analysis methods; which provides the analytical principles to illustrate the functionality and applicability of the feminist film theory of psychoanalysis and Marxist class conflict approach to film. Findings from the analyses show the simultaneous use of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic representations in the films. The findings correspond to the privileged male dominated patriarchal system and the objectification of the female body fused to create the cultural production of sexual politics. From the findings, the working class is oppressed within the framework of the social system where the reproduction of a 'class society' is confined within a rigid authoritarian state which governs and determines the continuity of class segregation to exist in the society to protect the interests of the middle class and the ruling elites in the capitalist society. The narrative of the six films chosen then unreservedly provides a conformist resolution to which all conflicts will be resolved.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Contextualisation and Aims of the Study

“My art is not for money. My art is for society...As artistes we should never forget the ordinary man, the trishaw-peddler, the laborer, or the slum-dweller...” – P. Ramlee (Lockard, 1991, p. 19).

This thesis strives to increase the understanding of sexual politics in gender discrimination towards women and class conflict in the society during the era of pre-independence Malaya and the early post-colonial era of developing Malaysia. In this research, the aim of proving that films are not only entertainment but films can reflect the social and economic realities of a society will be examined through the text and narrative in P. Ramlee's films. P. Ramlee was a prominent filmmaker and his popularity transcended generations of Malaysians. His films were blockbuster and he often drew themes from the contemporary society's social and economic issues (during the 1950's through to the early 1970's) to reflect in his films. Therefore in this thesis, six of P. Ramlee's chosen melodramas will be analysed and examined in the discussion of sexual politics and social class conflicts.

In this chapter, it will offer a summarised brief introduction and background information about P. Ramlee's origins, achievements and his significance to Malaysian society. This chapter also outlines the background of the study and provide an introduction to the issues that motivated me to conduct this study. This thesis aims to explain the

notion that P. Ramlee's films are open texts, a text is anything that can be read and is open to multiple meanings in the discussion of sexual politics and social class conflicts.

In this thesis, the researcher is the critic and I give the reading of the films chosen, speaking for myself when I write. Thus I rely on the methods of textual and narrative analysis of the chosen six melodramas to interpret P. Ramlee's texts to my own understanding and my own argument and my own conclusion.

The name P. Ramlee is a household name in Malaysia and also in Singapore where he is an important historical figure in the Malay film industry (Ramli Ismail, 1998; Mustafar Abdul Rahim and Aziz Sattar, 2008). P. Ramlee is special because he was able to capture not just the imagination but also the emotions of the local people particularly in Malaysia and Singapore through the narration of his films and his portrayal of the characters he played evident by his films' blockbuster success (Harding and Ahmad Sarji, 2002).

The 'Golden Years' of Malaysian cinema was around the period of 1950's and 1960's. This period of time was when P. Ramlee shone most brightly by achieving superstar status. He achieved great success by grabbing the opportunity given to him and proved himself worthy as one of the powerful players in the film industry of Malaysia and Singapore (Ahmad Sarji, 1998; Ramli Ismail, 1998; Mustafar Abdul Rahim and Aziz Sattar, 2008).

P. Ramlee's debut film '*Penarik Beca*' (1955) which he directed and starred in was successful both artistically and economically. This led to P. Ramlee's career as Malaysia's

and Singapore's most successful film director, actor, writer, songwriter, and singer (Harding and Ahmad Sarji, 2002). According to Ramli Ismail (1998), P. Ramlee became "the Malay director" (p. 72) that emerged as a huge blockbuster success who was widely recognised by producers and admired by audiences alike. He succeeded where others before him had failed to do so.

Ramli Ismail (1998) stated that "the phenomenal success of his debut film opened up many possibilities for him and other local film artists...all Malay films before this film were directed by expatriates" (p. 73). He further stated that P. Ramlee was successful because "these expatriate directors lacked proper understanding of the local language and the local culture" (p. 74).

It is a fact that P. Ramlee was obviously brilliant and successful in his career. It is an inevitable fact that P. Ramlee is an icon of Malaysian's national cinema. His films were able to bring a phenomenal change to the society by bringing the audience closer to the film medium. I would like to examine in this study how he achieved that by drawing themes for his films from the contemporary culture and politics of Malay society during the 1950's to early 1970's.

1.2 Centralised Area of Research and Purpose of Study

My area of research is to analyse the selected P. Ramlee's melodramas to examine the rise of sexual politics in gender discrimination towards women and the conflict of the division of social class. Ramlee's art of storytelling and the narrative of his films will be examined with the hypothesis that the moving images and texts in Ramlee's films

mirror the contemporary social condition of the 1950's through to the early 1970's society until his untimely death. I would firstly like to understand P. Ramlee as a person who was an actor and how his own life experiences influenced the subject matter that changed in his films according to the era of production. The eras are divided into two major sections in the analysis of the selected six melodramas; the Singapore era and the Kuala Lumpur era.

My purpose of conducting this study based on P. Ramlee's films is because P. Ramlee and his films is a fascinating subject in exploring the issues of sexual politics and the class stratification in Malaysian society. I would like to concentrate on how each of the selected P. Ramlee's films that was and being consumed by the audience where the relationship between the film text, images and the experience of watching films could be perceived as active. This was successful in creating a realisation in what we could consider as reality.

My decision to base the study on examining P. Ramlee's films is because I believe that P. Ramlee's films which are still being consumed by audiences today are able to influence the mainstream ideology; in particular two major sections of:

1. The gender power relations where images of woman were heavily based from a patriarchal perspective.
2. The fluid nature of the oppressed social class relationships that were often projected in P. Ramlee's films.

The films of P. Ramlee present gender, social, ethnic, economic and political relations as sometimes problematic, but ultimately as problems that have solutions in the

end of the narrative. I am fascinated that in a multi-ethnic country such as Malaysia, where the Malays, Chinese and Indians would recognise P. Ramlee as a national icon of Malaysian cinematic excellence.

P. Ramlee's films represent the work of an artist who controlled his work as no Asian director, beyond a handful of avant-garde filmmakers, ever had. Ramlee's films provide us with a nexus of Malay popular culture of the 1950s and 1960s, and reveal the ways in which different forms and aspects of this culture interacted and changed over time, especially a time of great political, social and cultural change throughout Malaysia and Southeast Asia as a whole. Quoting from Marx's (1852;1963) memorable comment that "the past hangs on the present like a nightmare upon the brain" p. 15.

Thus it is a fact that we usually define and interpret the present in terms of past experiences. In the sense where P. Ramlee's films are now classics but the strong influences of his films which were popularly consumed by the audience in the colonial and early postcolonial periods, can be taken into account in contributing to our country's present modern development to achieve significant success of formulating political, economic and cultural policies in the Malaysian society of different religions and different traditions.

1.3 Research Questions

The core element of this research is to investigate the films of P. Ramlee on the issues of sexual politics and social stratification through a theoretical construct that is derived from many different views that will be offered in the literature review and

theoretical framework chapters. In order to present a systematic perspective on these issues, therefore, the focus of the research is based on the following research questions:

1. What kind of representation of the images of women is depicted in P. Ramlee's films?
2. How do Ramlee's films support the power relation in the sexual politics of the society?
3. How do Ramlee's films capture the changing nature of class relationships?

1.4 Research Objectives

Other than the fundamental three research questions that this research attempts to answer, this research also aims to reach the objectives of the following:

1. Locate the texts in P. Ramlee's films within the framework of sexual politics and social class conflicts.
2. Investigate what P. Ramlee's films are trying to say within the limitations conveyed by the social structure and capitalist structure of post-colonial Malaysian society.
3. Provide a systematic process of reading and mapping the narrative structures, meanings, images, symbolic codes and themes, the solicitation of pleasure, identification and subjectivity within the film texts.

1.5 Outline of Chapters

This thesis is divided into eight chapters to give a comprehensive explanation and reading on the issues of sexual politics and social class conflicts.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter sets out the rationale of the research approach by providing a background to the main ideas that this thesis explores and contextualises. I would be addressing the research questions and objectives as I present a general preface with a brief discussion on the justification of researching and reading P. Ramlee's films. I would also present a brief history about P. Ramlee's origins and works.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter two positions this study within the existing literature available in print on the discussion of sexual politics and class conflicts, thereby providing an overview of the constructed theoretical framework.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will present the theoretical framework for the purpose of offering a specific reading and analysis of P. Ramlee's film texts. This chapter will also include the understanding and assessment of significance in the representations of gender relations and social class division in society which P. Ramlee himself and his films are included in. Thus, the theories presented in this chapter will be employed to analyse the six chosen films and in addition serves to motivate the study in that it is not a mere duplication of other existing literature.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology

This research will use the research methods of both textual analysis and narrative analysis that I would appropriately employ to address my initial research questions. This

chapter provides an underpinning for chapter six and seven which consists of the research findings in the analyses of the selected six films. Justification of choosing the research methods, the melodrama genre and the six masterpieces produced from different eras (timeline of the films produced in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur) of P. Ramlee's career will be answered and thoroughly clarified. Chapter four is imperative in guiding the structure of the film analysis in Chapter five, six and seven.

Chapter Five: Film Segmentation

This chapter will examine the six films divided into two eras; the Singapore era films and the Kuala Lumpur films by using the equilibrium formula. The segmentation of each film in each era will also provide a synopsis of each film's narrative individually.

Chapter Six and Seven: Film Analyses

The chosen six films will be assessed in terms of psychoanalysis and class conflict approach that illuminates the chosen feminist film theory dynamics underlying the film texts to provide a full cinematic experience of P. Ramlee's work. Chapter six would examine the subject matter of sexual politics and chapter seven would examine the subject matter of social class conflicts. Both chapters' film analyses will include films from both eras. In this light, the six films will be divided neatly into two different eras but will be analysed as a unit that reflects the themes. In these two chapters, the content of the previous five chapters are consolidated and applied to offer an in-depth analysis of the six films by P. Ramlee: (Singapore Production) – '*Penarek Becha*' (The Trishaw Man) 1955, '*Antara Dua Darjat*' (Between Two Classes) 1960 and '*Ibu Mertuaku*' (My Mother In-Law) 1961. (Kuala Lumpur Production) – '*Gerimis*' (Drizzling) 1968, '*Doktor Rushdi*' (Doctor Rushdi) 1970 and '*Putus Sudah Kaseh Sayang*' (Love is Gone) 1971. The analyses of

these six films are according to the structure of both textual and narrative analysis which provides the analytical principles to illustrate the functionality and applicability of the feminist film theory of psychoanalysis and Marxist class conflict approach to film. These films were selected for the workings of their subject matter, theme, narrative and the representation of gender and class relations. The six films shared archetype overtones which invite a feminist and Marxist critical reading.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions and Suggestions for further research

In the concluding chapter, the findings are summarised and assessed then the answers to each of my research questions in achieving my research objectives will be provided. The limitations of the study are examined and ideas for further research are presented.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In this study, I will take a reflective view of the research objectives by constructing an analytical framework within which it is possible to study claims about what 'we' women and men and residents of the different rungs on the social class ladder; are as a nation and as Malaysians. In order to achieve the purpose to answer the research questions, a particular theoretical construct in a structured framework needs to be developed. This in turn provides us with an overall understanding of P. Ramlee's films and the relationship they form with society. Therefore the construct of sexual politics and social class is developed in order to create a theoretical and methodological formulation.

The main objective of the study is not only to provide a specific reading and analysis of P. Ramlee's film texts but it is also concerned about the understanding and assessment of significance in the representations of gender relations and social class division in society; which P. Ramlee and his films are included in. The real focus is to offer an extensive literature review as foundation to develop a theoretical framework that can provide an integrated observation of the meanings of his film texts in relation to society. Thus this will provide the overall understanding of his films and the relationships they form with society.

The gender sentiments of inequality in sexual politics are expressed much similar to those between the struggles of members conflicting in the different category of social

class. In this account, class is very much intertwined with gender in the cultural context of understanding the experience of class and gender oppression and suppression.

In researching the relation of gender and social class in the six chosen melodramas of P. Ramlee, we have to also look at the existing capitalist economic and social system. The nation's desire to modernise and develop after independence helps put the film industry and its products further under the dominance of the ruling economic and political elites. Considering this complicated web of relations surrounding the film industry in general and P. Ramlee in particular, this research investigates Ramlee's films and at the same time tries to establish the fact that like any other mass communication medium, the film industry is also part of the larger social context that reflects gender oppression and class stratification.

This research therefore would argue that the films chosen do not criticise the conservative outlook of society or whether these films represent a certain set of ideological values. More importantly, it offers an examination of the relationship that they form with the rest of society and how these films and P. Ramlee have been appropriated as part and parcel of the social system.

In a society where class and gender differences prevail, filmic representations might or might not reflect social values of the society concerned. What is more important as this study points out, is the idea that such demarcation exists in society. Thus it is possible that the films of P. Ramlee represent such a relationship within a conservative tone. In other words, this research is confident that the films of P. Ramlee would be able to represent such a relationship. In this filmic context, Ramlee's films should be seen as not

just representing an 'imagined society' that represents images of society but the film texts are also trying to seek for the right kind of re-presentation of gender and class relations.

2.2 The Erection of Sexual Politics

Currently there is an extensive literature on the portrayal of women in the media (Sochen, 1987; Dow, 1996; Hall, 1998; Mazzarella and Pecora, 1999) and the different social class that exist in our society (Cohen, 1982; Berberoglu, 1994; Hall, 1997; Bertaux and Thompson, 1997). We are not just concerned with how women are portrayed in the media or how many women work in the media. However according to Bhasin (1994), "the concern is about what kinds of lives they lead, what status they have, and what kind of society we have" (p. 4).

Local literature review in women studies in general covers issues such as women's emancipation, political involvements, trade unions, legal protection or lack of, family laws, feminism and rights of women especially Muslim women in general and in particular the rights of divorcees and wives. Notably studies done on gender themes locally includes discussions from Rohana Ariffin (1988, 1991, 1997) where she examines how women were situated within a capitalist-patriarchal labour market situation where equal work resulted in unequal remuneration and the struggles of the women trade union.

Jamilah Ariffin (1991, 1994) examines women in the work place and the focus was on the economic status of those working in factories on the assembly lines, the entrepreneurial ventures and the available support systems for working women. Wazir Jahan Karim (2002) examines the taboo of sexuality and domination where she focused

on customary practices of family, marriage and social relations in explaining sexuality. Cecilia Ng, Maznah Mohamad, Beng Hui Tan (2006) examines women's position in society in the aspect of political Islam where the political system reflects a male dominant society.

The findings of the literature search for this study found the discussion of sexual politics and women's position in the popular culture is lacking within the context of media which do not critically assess the position of women vis a vis the patriarchal ideology in Malaysia. Women studies in media are popular on subjects of the stereotyped roles of women as nagging wives, gossiping women and sex objects in local and Hong Kong television soap operas (Shanthi and Wang, 1996).

Studies on women's portrayal as the weaker sex, holding secondary roles and subordinate to men in the broadcast media such as locally produced drama and news (Wang, 1994; Wang and Mustafa Kamal Anuar, 1991, 1994, 1996, Wang, 2000; Kaur, 2004) concentrated only in depicting the stereotypical and traditional women's roles without an in-depth discussion the inter-play of sexual politics in the context of patriarchal ideology.

The concept of sexual politics is based upon the perspective of a patriarchal system in our society and was the term was coined by Kate Millet (1969). According to Millett (1969), "sexual politics obtains consent through the 'socialisation' of both sexes to basic patriarchal requirements with regard to temperament, role, and status, as to status a pervasive assent to the prejudice of male superiority guarantees superior status in the male, inferior in the female" (p. 26).

In a logical sense, it is understandable that people who have a higher status will usually adopt the roles of the employer or the master and this will definitely encourage the development of the temperaments of dominance. That is self-evident in the social class system in society as re-represented in the film texts. This also reflects the gender relations between men and women, whereas men are dominant and women are made to be submissive.

Here we can understand the implication of the power relationship between the genders where the men is given the reign of more power over women. Gender roles then come into play for men are assumed to be the 'leaders' in society and the 'authorities' within the household. Thus Seidler (1991) concludes that "women's subordination is structured into the iron heart of capitalist institutions" (p. 37).

In the concept of 'sexual politics', the definition of 'politics' has to be defined within the context of power struggle between the male and the female. Millet (1969) defined the term 'politics' in the following:

Politics refer to the power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another. By way of parenthesis one might add that although an ideal politics might simply be conceived of as the arrangement of human life on agreeable and rational principles from whence the entire notion of power over others should be banished, one must confess that this is not what constitutes the political as we know it, and it is to this that we must address ourselves. (p. 23-24)

Here the reference to the definition of the term 'politics' is about the power relationships between both genders where men obtain more power over women in society.

Seidler (1991) further explains how politics is intertwined with power in the following:

Politics becomes appropriated into a form of instrumentalism because it operates within the context of a structure of negation of emotionality which inevitably constitutes a blindness to reality itself. Politics is defined as a feature of the public realm alone, supposedly it is a matter of reason, power and interests. (p. x)

As a result, politics becomes a theme of achieving power to legislate for goals that have been set, power then becomes an end in itself. As we can see with what is happening in our world today, it seems we have all lost a sense of what we are struggling for. As Seidler (1991), argues that “politics has been separated from morality and emotional life, which have been relegated to the private and the individual” (p. xv). As dealing with sexual politics, we need to be careful not to lose the vision of a more gender equal society.

Therefore the focus of sexual politics is on the position of women in the relationship between both sexes to provide an understanding of women’s social status in a patriarchal society. According to Seidler (1991), “patriarchy creates its own sense of common interests and reproduces its own sense of equality between men in relationship to women and capitalist institutions play on this and exploit it deftly to their own advantage” (p. 44). The status of women in our society is neither a new issue nor is it a fully settled one. Thus from the theory of sexual politics, men has already won by having more power in governing the society and yet the function of class are based on sexual status where the patriarchal system loudly enunciated the general acceptance of masculine supremacy operating a gender double standard in society.

The emphasis of sexual politics should be made part of a larger social process, thus we need to recognise that it does not just concern the oppression and subordination of women. We have to understand that the broader implications of sexual politics, it cannot be burdened only to women, although then nature of men's contribution is clearly open to discussion. But sexual politics is also about men and the powers of masculinities, the gender power play is very important in the understanding of sexual politics. It is not enough for men to give only support to women in their struggles for change. If men are to take the insights of feminism to heart, then sexual politics has to push beyond a realm exclusive to women, whilst taking care not to trivialise or marginalise the work and family sphere of women, which unfortunately happens all too often not just as portrayed in P. Ramlee's films but sadly it still reflects the modern society.

2.2.1 The Sexist Society: Women's (Attempt at) Liberation from the Patriarchal System

In analysing the concept of sexual politics within the chosen films by P. Ramlee, the patriarchal ideology behind the film texts is important to highlight the subordination of women. The status and images of women portrayed in P. Ramlee's films prove to be a valuable source to analyse the sexual politics of male dominance in patriarchal society. According to Barthes (1973), "the ideological operations of patriarchy implied in the feminist film theory by the use of the term 'patriarchal ideology'...where the effects of ideology is to make what is cultural and therefore historically variable appear natural and therefore immutable" (p. 75). This notion is supported by Kaplan (1977), "a film may be seen to embody a series of ideological operations through which woman is constructed as eternal, mythical and unchanging, an essence or a set of fixed images and meanings, a sign within a patriarchal order" (p. 404).

The focus is on the understanding of the meaning of the term, 'patriarchy', which has become the usual shorthand for the kind of society founded on men's gender domination. The term 'patriarchy' has been debated widely with different meanings from the different schools of feminism discourses and is fraught with difficulties of interpretation. Therefore it is useful to provide various definitions of patriarchy here as the study will utilise a specific meaning of that term according to the definitions in the supporting the analysis of the P. Ramlee's films. Three working definitions of patriarchy are selected for this purpose.

Coward (1987) stated that "patriarchy describes the political and social control of women by men. Here patriarchy promises to deliver the history of the relations between the sexes and to explain the form and functions of male domination" (p. 3). Hartmann (1979), believes that solidarity among men perpetuates their control over women and she defines patriarchy as "a set of social relations between men, which has a material base and which, through hierarchical relations, established or created interdependence and solidarity among men, that enables them to dominate women" (p. 11). Walby (1986), defines patriarchy as "a system of interrelated structures through which men exploit women, while capitalism is a system in which capital expropriates wage labourers, it is the mode of exploitation which constitutes the central difference between the two systems" (p. 46).

Patriarchal system can basically be divided into two major forms; the private (domestic) to public (capitalism and the state) forms of patriarchy. The ideology of the patriarchal system is simple with the men as the leaders, the decision makers, the breadwinners and most definitely the men have the stronger power and better privileges in

the society and in the family. The ideology itself is being advertised and reinforced at every level of our society with such great influences in our political, economic and social order as represented in most of P. Ramlee's texts.

The patriarchal system becomes the main and conventional resource for the narrative where text and images of both women and men in P. Ramlee's films conformed to the cinematic representation of the ideal society. The power relation in sexual politics of the society is able to explain why many of P. Ramlee's film texts depicts women and men in such a specific patriarchal order that is based heavily from the root of society's culture. The patriarchal system evolved from the culture of a clear divergence of gender and sexual discrimination thus can explain the struggle of sexual politics between both genders represented in the images and texts of P. Ramlee's films.

Morgan (1840;1976) describes the situation of women under a patriarchal society in the following:

If, in the first era of society, woman was the victim of man's physical superiority, she is still, in the last, the subject of laws, in the enactment of which she has had no voice and amenable to the penalties of a code, from which she derives but little protection. While man, in his first crude attempts at jurisprudence, has surrounded the sex with restraints and disabilities, he has left its natural rights unguarded, and its liberty unacknowledged. Merging the very existence of woman in his own, he has allowed her no separate interest, assigned her no independent possessions. For says the law is the law of man, 'the husband is the head of the wife, and all that she has belongs to him'. Even the fruit of her own labour is torn from her, unless she is protected by the solitary blessedness of a derided but innocent celibacy, or by an infamous frailty. Thus to adopt the barbarous jargon of these barbarous laws, as *femme sole* or *femme couverte*, she is equally the victim of violence and injustice, those universal and invariable attributes of the law of the strongest. (p. 17-18)

The status of women has always been an inferior one when compared to the status of a man in the patriarchal society. The segregation of the sexes gives a woman the roles of submissive daughter, patient wife and respected mother. The range of her interests might include the education and upbringing of her children, responsibility for the well-being of her family and support for moral values by herself and members of her family. Women's roles are confined in the family and are learned. According to De Beauvoir (1972), "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (p. 249). Therefore it is implied that femininity is socially constructed. This insistence of De Beauvoir on social construction of femininity encapsulates the thesis-point of various trends in contemporary feminism.

De Beauvoir also asserted "that women are referred to by men as inessential, incidental and second sex" (p. 250). She argues that men perceive themselves as subjects since they think themselves as capable of 'risking life' whereas women are perceived as ones who are capable of only giving life and are pushed aside as 'others'. Thus according to De Beauvoir, the responsibilities of wifehood and motherhood relegate women to a secondary position. The institution of marriage drains the soul of woman and limits her self-development. De Beauvoir compares a prostitute with a wife and asserts that at least a prostitute gets wealth and fame whereas a wife only gets enslavement. She suggests that a woman should have a career to escape from the traps of wifehood and motherhood.

Women are now encouraged to break out from the trappings of domestic life and join the economic production world. The impact of such circumstances would bring forth

changes in the traditional patriarchal model of production and the overall social system. In order to understand and encourage the changes in the status of women both domestic and economic with the intertwining limitations of the patriarchal system on the value of women, the concept of historical materialism argued by Firestone (1970) in her book *Dialectic of Sex* has to be explored in this chapter. Firestone synthesises the ideas of Marx and Engels into a feminist version of the materialist theory of history and attempts to rewrite history by substituting 'reproduction' for 'production', and 'sex class' for 'economic class'. Firestone supports Engels' argument that "the course of history that seeks the ultimate cause of all events in the economic development of society lies in the changes of the models of production and exchange and the division of society into distinct classes" (p. 12). Firestone (1970) argues the following:

Historical materialism is that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all historical events in the dialectic of sex. The division of society into two distinct biological classes for procreative reproduction, and the struggles of these classes with one another; in the changes in the modes of marriage, reproduction and child care created by these struggles in the connected development of other physically-differentiated (castes) and in the first division of labour based on sex which developed into the economic-cultural class system. (p. 198-199)

As concluded by Heywood (2003), "gender inequality originated in the patriarchal system forced on women through their biology: the physical, social and psychological disadvantages imposed by pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequent child-rearing", (p. 272). This creates an imbalance of power where men have the competitive edge by being free from such 'natural' responsibilities. Other than being oppressed due to their biology, women's attempt for liberation from the patriarchal system is again hindered due to being subjected because of their sexuality. This is because according to Millet (1969), "the

patriarch male-dominated socio-political system includes all dimensions of life including sex” (p. 30-31).

Therefore, the radical feminists argue that the shift of definition of feminism from social equity to the ending of sexist oppression as a radical and a political shift. According to Mackinnon (1989), “radical feminism is feminism and sexuality is a form of power” (p. 117) and the relationship between man and woman is a power relationship. Marriage is a financial alliance and family is the chief institution of patriarchy, which constructs female-subordination.

Mackinnon (1997) states that system women’s sexuality is represented in the milieu of domination and submission within the patriarchal. Therefore for women, sexual power is masochistic while for men such power is eroticised. One of the prime motives of men for domination over women is sexual satisfaction. She observes that “male dominance is sexual, meaning men in particular, if not men alone sexualise hierarchy; gender is one” (p. 353).

Mackinnon (1989, 1997) argues that sexuality is pervasive and it permeates all dimensions of life. Sexuality hence is one of the fundamental dynamics of the inequality of the sexes because it helps for the distribution of social power by gender preferring the men. Thus, gender discrimination can basically be explained in terms of ‘sexual politics’ because sexuality is a social construct of male power causing inequality. Sexuality in patriarchy is defined by men, forced on women and it constitutes the meaning of gender. Mackinnon (1982) therefore suggests feminists analyse the sexuality of dominance and submission in order to change it. According to her it is necessary for feminists to criticise

the social construct of 'sexuality' in the perspective of social relations of gender and power.

Mackinnon states the following:

Sexual meaning is not made only or even primarily by words or in texts. It is made in social relations of power in the world through which process gender is also produced. In feminist terms, the fact that male power has power means that the interests of male sexuality construct what sexuality as such means including the standard way it is allowed and recognised, to be felt, expressed and experience". (p. 530-531)

Mackinnon (1997) further argues that, the predisposition in women to be obsessed with their appearance and image is due to narcissism. Narcissism insures that women identifies with that image of herself that men holds up. Thus what women generally do is also socially determined because it is society which defines what is femaleness. She emphasises that "socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms" (p. 356). In addition, Mackinnon (1987) states the following:

All women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water. All women either live under the constant threat of sexual abuse or as the targeted survivors in a rape culture, under post-traumatic stress. As long as sex inequality remains unequal and sexual, women cannot possess their own sexuality nor can they enjoy it of their own. In other words, to seek an equal sexuality without political transformation is to seek equality under conditions of inequality". (p. 242-243)

Therefore, a critical analysis of the social construct of sexuality and a political transformation is needed in order to seek equal sexuality. We can then sum up Mackinnon's views in relation to our understanding that male power, sexuality and objectivity are all interconnected to each other. Thus at the level of representation of the narrative structure, women only exist at the periphery with the men at the helm patronising

the issue and struggle of the power game in sexual politics. Fonte (1996) concludes the relationship of men and women in society as a tolerance exhibited by women in the following:

For if we are inferiors in status, but not in worth, this is an abuse that has been introduced into the world and that men have then, over time, gradually translated into law and custom; and it has become so entrenched that they claim and even actually believe that the status they have gained through their bullying is theirs by right. And we women, who, among our other good qualities, are eminently mild, peaceable, and benign by nature, are prepared to put up with even an offense of this magnitude for the sake of a peaceful life. (p. 61)

2.2.2 The Malay Women Dilemma: Islam and Patriarchy

Here I would like to discuss further the depiction of the patriarchal system in P. Ramlee's films because firstly P. Ramlee is a Malay man living in a Malay society, he is also a Muslim practicing the religion of Islam. Finally most importantly, his films were produced mainly targeting the Malay Muslim audience. My point is, I want to emphasise is not the religion of Islam itself but of the broad understanding of the image of men and women in Islam as reflected in P. Ramlee's film texts.

In the history of Malaysia, patriarchal gender relations have been laid down since the coming of early Islam in the 13th century, followed by the British colonial powers in the 19th century. The British colonial government further exacerbated existing patriarchal relations (Hong, 1983; Azizah, 1985; Jamilah, 1994). Walby (1986), explains that the state is a site of patriarchal relations which is necessary to patriarchy as a whole. The state represents patriarchal as well as capitalist interests and furthers them in action. Rohana

Ariffin (1998) explains the changes brought forward by the Islamisation of the Malay society in the following:

Before the advent of Islam, gender relations were determined by customary Malay laws where property and inheritance rights were equal and domicile after marriage was bilateral rather than patriarchally unilateral. After Islamisation and the implementation of the patriarchal *Adat Temenggong*, inequality particularly in family laws, began to emerge. An example of such inequality could be seen in inheritance laws, where female children received one-third while the son inherited two-thirds of an estate. (p. 71)

In order to explain the patriarchal system practised by the Islamic Malay society in sexual politics, we need to identify what is the interpretation of Islamic values concerning the position of women. It is observed that Muslim scholars come up with various interpretations of the Islamic texts of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions (the main sources of knowledge) on given issues.¹ For instance, on the term '*Qawwamun*' that occurs in the Qur'anic verse 4:34, there are various interpretations and conclusions provided by Muslim scholars. Most of the interpretations of the term '*Qawwamun*' provide a male-dominated vision of a Muslim family. (Taha Jabir Al Alwani, 1989, p. 3) By male dominated family, we mean a patriarchal family. Whereas a deeper reflection of the term '*Qawwamun*' and 'patriarchy' reveal that they are not synonymous.

In a patriarchal family, the male head tends to be despotic and authoritarian and women and children become his subjects. Whereas, the Qur'anic verse 4:34, in which the term '*Qawwamun*' occurs implies that, men are given financial responsibility for women and children in the family. According to some scholars, it also includes moral and overall

¹ I am not a Muslim and would hold no position to offer any accurate interpretations of the Al Quran verses and the religion of Islam. My understanding of the terms '*Qawwamun*' and '*Shura*' are solely based on my academic readings from translated English articles written by Muslim scholars. For additional readings, I recommend Khurshid Ahmed, *Family Life in Islam*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, 1974; see also Lamy al Faruqi, *Woman, Muslim Society and Islam*, Indianapolis, American Trust Publications, 1987.